

Book reviews

Jewish Medical Ethics: A Comparative and Historical Study of the Jewish Religious Attitudes to Medicine and its Practice

Immanuel Jakobovits

(Pp xlii, 439, \$10.00 cloth, \$5.95 paper)

Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1975.

This astonishingly comprehensive work, the only attempt so far at surveying the whole field of Jewish medical ethics in any language, was first published in 1959 since when it has justifiably acquired something of the status of a classic. It now appears with a new chapter on recent developments which brings it right up to date. Although the author is the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth of Nations, called upon to render practical decisions for his flock on legal and ethical questions of the kind considered in the book, he is at pains to point out that this is not a collection of Orthodox rabbinic responsa but is an historical, objective treatment of an important branch of human knowledge and philosophy. As such the work is essential reading for everyone, Jewish or non-Jewish, interested in the acute problems that require to be faced as a result of contemporary trends in medical thought and practice. Among the subjects which receive detailed treatment, in a vivid style with admirable clarity, are abortion, necropsies, eugenics, euthanasia, sterilization and heart transplants. The comparative approach is much in evidence. Jewish views are frequently stated against the background of Christian and other religious traditions as well as in relation to medical and general scientific attitudes.

Readers who go to this book, however, for a statement of the official Jewish view will not find it; indeed, from the great variety of opinions expressed by the authorities quoted it becomes clear that there is

no such thing. In the absence of a central authority for Judaism (attempts at reviving the Sanhedrin have, fortunately, turned out to be dismal failures), all that can be said is that after lengthy and at times vehement debates a kind of consensus is arrived at and accepted by the majority of Orthodox rabbis, though with the minority voice never completely silenced. Furthermore, practically all the teachers referred to adopt as their basic premise that the Talmud affords virtually infallible guidance on medical ethics, their only problem being how to interpret the Talmud correctly and apply the principles found in that gigantic work to new conditions. Occasionally brave voices are heard in these pages hesitatingly suggesting that the Talmudic rabbis only had the science and medicine of their day so that, for example, remedies and cures found in the Talmud should not be relied upon. Yet even here there is never any questioning of the Talmud as the complete and final authority for morals. It should be noted, therefore, that in these matters Conservative, Reform and Liberal rabbis, while attaching much significance to Talmudic precedents, in varying degrees do not see themselves as entirely bound to preserve intact every Talmudic rule and are prepared to be guided, too, by fresh insights provided by the human situation in a new world; one of extreme moral confusion, to be sure, but the only one in which we have to live.

LOUIS JACOBS

mediate guidance as to the right or wrong of a proposed action will not find it in this book. The primary concern of the author is to provide an exposition of ethics using the word in the sense of 'that area of philosophical theory which is concerned with understanding the nature of moral judgement'. This he does well, covering the major ethical theories from John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, through natural law as described by Aquinas, the determinism of Spinoza, Kant's moral imperatives to the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Sartre, briefly, but lucidly without technical jargon. He also discusses the meaning of terms, such as 'happiness', 'responsibility', 'conscience' and 'respect'.

The reader is encouraged to adopt a critical, analytical approach to moral statements, and to discern the ambiguities and inconsistencies which are often present. The author does this so well that there is danger of the reader developing an ethical nihilism leading in turn to the elevation of 'personal convictions to the status of inerrant and all-embracing rules'. Certainly one is left with the clear impression that philosophy cannot provide an answer to the moral problems of medical practice; it can help by exposing answers which are spurious, but moral decision must ultimately be based on something other than philosophy.

All who are interested in either the theory or the practice of moral decision making in medicine will find this book helpful.

JOHN MARSHALL

Moral Dilemmas in Medicine – A Coursebook in Ethics for Doctors and Nurses

Alastair V Campbell

(Pp 212; price £1.95, 2nd ed.)

Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh, 1975.

The doctor or nurse seeking im-